

# WORK AND FAMILY: WOMEN'DILEMMA IN PUERTO RICO

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The present paper is based on research about the significance of work for married women with pre-school children and the relationship between work and family roles for these women in an urban center in Puerto Rico. The first section presents a brief review of the literature on family and women's work in Puerto Rican culture. The research methodology, findings and discussion follow the presentation. The last part refers to implications of the study and recommendations for future research.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature on the Puerto Rican family stresses that the place of women is in the home. Puerto Rican women value themselves very highly in their roles as mothers. The general principle is that a mother should look after her children and the home and that the real influence of the female lies in her position as homemaker, mother and teacher of the "next" generation. The socialization process in the Puerto Rican family reinforces dependency, stability, obedience, responsibility and submission in the daughter. She is expected to be a mother-substitute to her younger siblings, caring for them, attending to their wants and helping with household chores (Landis, 1959; Wolf in Fernández-Méndez 1972). The position of the man as "head of the family" holding a superior position of power, authority and privilege contrasts with the subordinate and restrictive position for the female.

These traditional sex roles are supported by the educational system and mass media. A study of education in Puerto Rico demonstrated how educational policies, activities for the development of the students, curriculum and texts reinforce traditional sex roles and inequalities between the sexes (Picó, 1979). Moreover, the presentation of feminine stereotypes in the mass media not only reflects socialization at home and school, but also helps to perpetuate these traditional sex roles.

Although the hispanic heritage provides a common background for the Puerto Rican family some changes have been effected by industrialization and Americanization (Steward in Fernández-Méndez, 1972). Some of these changes are related to the place of women in the family and in society, particularly their participation in the labor force. The incorporation of women into the labor force increased drastically after the United States takeover of Puerto Rico in 1898. The expansion of the manufacturing and commercial sectors of the economy brought radical changes into the structure of the labor market, and the impact of these changes upon women was considerable (Rivera-

Quintero, 1979). Besides domestic servants, women were recruited in large numbers for tobacco stripping, home needlework, and elaboration of straw hats, holding the lowest paid jobs and working under sordid conditions (Rivera-Quintero, 1979). The movement toward industrialization continued and in 1955, for the first time in Puerto Rico's history, manufacturing passed agriculture as an income generator (Wegenheim, 1970). Since most industrial development takes place in urban areas, the natural tendency has been a general movement from the country to the city (Hauberg, 1974). But industrial development in Puerto Rico was not enough to employ all persons capable of working. In the search for better economic opportunities and social mobility, many Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States. Availability of jobs and low-cost transportation were the necessary pre-conditions for mass migration. During the 1950's net population transfer to the United States jumped to an annual rate of 40,000 which over the decade amounted to 20 per cent of the population of Puerto Rico (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975). In recent years many migrants have been returning to the Island which has had an effect on the annual number of migrants. Net population transfer from Puerto Rico to the continental United States will gradually diminish as the two migration streams tend toward equality (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975).

In other words, the interrelation of factors such as industrialization, urbanization and the continuous contact with the United States have contributed to some changes in women's roles, in particular for working women.

The labor force participation rate for women in Puerto Rico is approximately 28 percent for women 16 years of age and over (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1982-83). If a comparison is made with the continental United States, where the rate of participation of women in the labor force is 52 percent (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1982-93), then the participation of Puerto Rican women in the labor force is relatively low. However, that figure cannot be isolated from other figures. Women constitute around 51 percent of the Puerto Rican population with a median age of 25.5 years (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1982-83). The median number of years of school completed for the population in the labor force is 12.6 for women, while the equivalent for men is 12.1; the average age of employed women is 34 years old; 25 percent are under 25 years old and 66 percent are between 25 and 54 years old. Furthermore, the percentage of women with a college degree increased from 17 percent in 1963 to 38 percent in 1981; and 58 percent of the new employment positions created in 1980 were held by women (Departamento de Trabajo, 1983).

These facts --more women than men, a relatively young population women pursuing higher academic degrees, and more women progressively occupying new employment positions-- suggest that female labor force participation rates will increase unless the economy and the job market opportunities change. Therefore, a question arises with respect to the impact that this participation in the labor force has on the traditional roles prescribed for women in the Puerto Rican culture.

A study of Puerto Rican working mothers has demonstrated that most families approached equality in decision-making patterns (Quiñones-Rodríguez, 1976). This finding is consistent with the data used in Weller's study (1967) which indicated that women who work exercise greater authority in family decision-making than non-working women.

Another study found that work does have a differential impact on the woman's position in the family depending on the normative expectations about authority relations that the woman has and the amount of authoritative behavior that the husband exhibits (López-Garriga, 1976). The author analyzed the variable of class to explain more clearly the contradiction between the expectation of male dominance (traditional family) and woman's participation in the family when she is also an economic provider. Women in the middle strata solve the conflict using manipulative strategies in an effort to maintain a traditional image, while women in the working class are more direct and aggressive in the efforts to gain a significant role in family matters (López-Garriga, 1976).

Several articles were reviewed which examined working patterns of women in Puerto Rico over time. Rivera-Quintero (1979) analyzed the role that women played in the development of capitalism in Puerto Rico. Picó (1980) examined the gradual transformation of women's economic function. Both authors analyzed female employment in Puerto Rico in terms of occupation, salaries and specific demographic characteristics (Picó and Rivera, 1970). Burgos (1982) examined the trends of women's participation in the labor force during the period between 1899 and 1975 and its relationship to sociodemographic characteristics and historical-economic factors. The present research focuses on Puerto Rican women and its objectives are to understand the significance of work for employed and unemployed married women with pre-school children; the differences between these women; and their perceptions of different aspects of family life.

#### METHODOLOGY

The present research may be classified as a combined exploratory-descriptive study. The rationale for selecting this design is that it responds to the nature of the topic under study. The significance of work for women is a relatively unexplored topic in Puerto Rico. The descriptive aspects of the present research aims for precision in the presentation of the characteristics of employed married women with pre-school children. At the same time the study compares this group with a group of unemployed married women with pre-school children in order to establish differences and/or similarities, to determine how different women with similar backgrounds visualize paid work and to analyze the variables related to these differences. The way women combine family roles with work is also examined for both groups.

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### Definition of Concepts

Several operational definitions are used in the present study. A restricted definition of work is used: any activity women engage in outside the home for which they receive wages or salary. It is important to clarify that a more complete definition of work should include housework, child care, reproduction and maintenance of the labor force. However, in order to avoid confusion a restricted definition of work is used. Other operational definitions included in this study are the following:

Significance of work : the reasons, motivations, explanations and meanings women give to work.

Personal significance of work: the reasons, motivations, explanations and meanings given to work which are related to personal fulfillment, respect for women's work, improvement of position at work, good feelings about work and bad feelings about staying at home.

Social significance of work: the reasons, motivations, explanations and meanings given to work which are related to the contribution work makes to social relations and society.

Economic significance of work: the reasons, motivations, explanations and meanings given to work which are related to family needs, children's education and special activities, and leaving the job if their husbands are able to support their families.

Employed women: those women working at the time of the study in any occupation for which they receive monetary compensation.

Unemployed women: those women not working for pay at the time of the study of those who have never worked for pay.

Married women: those women 16 years of age or over, legally or consensually married.

Pre-school children: children who are under six years of age.

Traditional family roles: the notion or idea that a mother's main responsibility in life is her children; that girls should be raised to be good housekeepers while boys should be good economic providers; and that married women without children have not fulfilled their role as women.

Less traditional family roles: ideas that fathers as well as mothers are responsible for their children; that parents should teach sons to do the house chores and daughters to be independent; and that women should be able to decide how many children they desire to have once married.

### Sampling Procedure

For the purpose of this study, a sample of 140 married women with preschool children was drawn from the middle and lower income sectors of the master sample of the metropolitan area of San Juan, developed by the Business Research Center of the University of Puerto Rico. The master sample included 59,473 housing unit from middle-income sectors and 51,219 from lower income sectors. A sampling interval was used to obtain 140 housing units from the master plan, 70 from the middle sector, and 70 from the lower sector. In the field, employed and unemployed women were identified by asking married women with at least one preschool child about their working status; respondents were selected on a quota-sampling basis.

Incomplete interviews and unequal proportions of employed and unemployed women in the middle and low class sectors reduced the sample to one hundred and twenty four (124) married women with pre-school children, half on them (62) employed and the other half (62) unemployed.

### Data Collection

The main instrument used to collect the data from each of the study subjects was a face-to-face structured interview with "fixed-alternative" and "open-ended" types of questions. Open-ended questions were included to provide a better understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

The interview schedule was designed to obtain the following types of information for both employed and unemployed married women in the study: socio-demographic characteristics, work history, significance of work including personal, economic and societal categories, attitude toward children, family roles, housework and child care responsibilities. Specific but similar questions were asked of employed and unemployed married women about paid work, housework, attitudes of husbands toward wives' employment and problems that work might generate. The study sample permits generalizing the findings to women in middle and lower sectors in the urban metropolitan area but not to the general population of women in Puerto Rico.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Socio-demographic Characteristics

Respondents for the present research were one hundred twenty-four married women with pre-school children, half of them employed (62) and the other half (62) unemployed. They came from a relatively homogeneous population. The majority of the women (57%) were born in the Metropolitan Area, while 31 percent were born in small towns. Six percent were born in the United States and another five percent in other countries.

It was a relatively young population and the median age for women in the sample was in the category of 21 to 25 years old; the majority, 89 percent, had been married only once. Only 11 percent married two or more times. Vázquez-Calzada (1981) has similar findings for women on the whole island: the median age for women was 20 years old when they first got married, 81 percent have been married once and 14 percent two or more times.

Other characteristics of the sample reflected similarities. These characteristics included mothers' education and occupation, marriage relationship and planning of children. The majority of the respondents' mothers, 70 percent, had nine years or less of school completed and 72 percent of them were housewives. Approximately 77 percent of women in the sample described their marriage relationship as good; and 60 percent of them either planned all their children or some of them. It seems that women were satisfied with their married life and the number of children they had at the time of the study.

As was expected, Table I shows that employed woman has more years of school completed than unemployed women.

Table I

## YEARS OF SCHOOL COMPLETED BY RESPONDENTS

	Years of School Completed							
	13 years or more		10-12 years		9 years or less		Total	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Employed	29	46.8	26	41.9	7	11.3	62	100
Unemployed	11	17.7	28	45.2	23	37.1	62	100

This finding is consistent with other study findings. Nieva and Gutek (1981) mentioned several researchers that reported a positive relationship between amount of education and probability of engaging in paid employment among women.

Another finding of the study was related to the number of children. Employed women tend to have fewer children than unemployed women, but the difference was not significant. The majority of employed women (63%) had two children while unemployed women (60%) had three children.

### Significance of Work

The concept of significance of work for this study refers to reasons, motivations, explanations and meanings women give to work related to personal fulfillment, self-sufficiency, career and achievement orientation, social contribution, social relations and economic need. Items related to the concept of significance of work were examined separately by using cross-tabulations. Personal significance of work was related to verbal expressions such as: "women should be respected when they work"; "women feel very good when they do their job well"; "women would like to improve their position at work"; and "women feel bad when they stay home all their lives". Both employed and unemployed women agreed with the items related to personal significance of work. No significant differences were found between the study groups.

Social significance of work was related to the verbal expressions: "work allows women to meet and relate to other people", and "women's work constitutes a contribution to society". All women in the sample agreed with the first expression about social relations. Again, both employed and unemployed woman agreed with the items related to social significance of work.

In terms of economic significance of work, three expressions were included: "women work for family needs", "women work for children's education and special activities"; and "women will quit their jobs if their husbands are able to support their families."

Both study groups disagreed with the expressions that women work for family needs and for children's education and special activities. However, employed women disagreed more than unemployed women with the expression, "women will quit their jobs if husbands are able to support their families". It seems that employed women are not willing to quit their jobs even if their husbands improved their position at work. Therefore, employed and unemployed agreed with the items related to personal and social significance of work, and disagreed with two of the items related to economic significance of work.

### Family Component

The family component included respondent's attitudes toward children, opinions about family roles, respondents' perceptions of husbands' participation in household chores and child care; and respondents' perceptions of husbands' attitude toward their wives' employment. Items included in each component were crosstabulated by working status. Attitudes toward children included negative perceptions of children as a burden, or anger toward them, and more positive attitudes such as encouraging children to participate in family matters. Most of the women expressed a positive attitude toward their children, a finding which is consonant with other literature

demonstrating that children are highly valued in Puerto Rican culture. However, a difference between the study groups was found in their opinion about the statement that "the only reason I do not have more children is economic". Only 37.1 percent of the employed women agreed with that expression, whereas 62.9 percent of the unemployed women agreed with the same expression. This suggests that unemployed women think of economic reason as the main reason for not having children since they do not have of family income. On the other hand, employed women contributed to the family income and placed more importance on other reasons such as limited time for the socialization and education of their children. Furthermore, the socio-economic status of employed women was higher than that for unemployed women. Therefore, economic pressure might be higher for unemployed women.

Since perception of family roles was an important variable in the study, crosstabulations were performed with all the items related to traditional and less traditional family roles. Both study groups agreed with the responsibility of parents toward their children. However, unemployed women seemed to assign more responsibility to mothers for their children than employed women. Even more, unemployed women tend to be more traditional in the socialization of girls and boys than employed women.

Both study groups disagreed with the idea that sons should be taught and involved in the house chores. This finding is consistent with the traditional roles assigned to men in the Puerto Rican culture.

A significant difference between employed and unemployed women was found in relation to the statement that married women without children have not completed their roles as women. The tendency is for employed women to disagree and unemployed women to agree with the statement.

Other expressions that may be considered less traditional present similarities among the study groups. However, these items demonstrated, to a certain extent, the ambivalence of employed women. They tended to agree less to traditional family roles than unemployed women, but did not agree with less traditional family roles.

Another area explored in this section was the respondents' perceptions of husbands' participation in household chores and child care. There were not significant differences between the study groups in this area. Women perceived that less than five percent of husbands participated by themselves in chores such as cooking, washing dishes, sweeping floors, mopping, cleaning the bathroom and doing the laundry. A greater participation was perceived in chores such as food shopping (12%), cleaning the windows (12%), gardening (25%), cleaning the patio (27%), paying the bills (39%), and taking out the garbage (47%). In addition, women perceived no participation in child care



activities such as changing diapers, dressing the child and taking care of children when ill, less than five percent participation in feeding and bathing the child, discipline, helping with homework, attending school meetings and putting the child to bed. A greater participation was perceived in only two child-care activities: playing and recreation (7%) and taking the children to school (12%). The low participation of husbands in most house chores and child care activities is consistent with the study of Quiñones Rodríguez (1976) particularly when compared with the participation of wives.

Perceptions of husbands attitude toward their wives' employment included items such as husband's recognition of the importance of women's work and items that related women's work to family problems. In general, employed women perceived a positive attitude from their husbands while unemployed women perceived a negative attitude. The importance attributed to the husbands' attitudes could be considered an example of the traditional view of the husband as head of the family. That is, although working outside the home is not a traditional role for women this finding suggests that such work may be more acceptable if a Puerto Rican woman thinks her husband approves of it because she would not feel she was violating the traditional authority given to the husband in Puerto Rican families.

However, the employed women's perceptions of their husbands' positive attitudes toward working women and their tendency to agree less with traditional family roles than the unemployed women may indicate that some changes are occurring in the families of employed women in relation to the acceptance of nontraditional cultural patterns but that these changes are small and happening slowly.

Because of the limitations of the present research it is impossible to determine which of these interpretations is correct. First, the study sample was small; second, the study instrument was not independently validated. Therefore, it is possible that the instrument did not measure women's real attitude about family roles and work. Respondents also may not have answered the questions truthfully but as socially expected. Finally, the fact that the women were interviewed only once for approximately an hour by the structured questionnaire may not have permitted enough time or flexibility to grasp truthful attitudes about family and work. It is difficult for married women to express problems about their marriage or their children or housework and paid work. For example, Silva-Bonilla (1981) found that the only women that openly accepted problems around marriage were those already divorced or women considering divorce, although these problems were classified as strictly personal. Women tend to substitute in their language the word problem for the word difficulty, since this word does not convey any implication of failure (Silva-Bonilla, 1981). Therefore, it is possible that employed women responded in terms they perceived as socially acceptable rather than expressing their true feelings and ambivalences.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study have implications for social work practice, education for social work and social policy. In general, practitioners should inquiry more about the meaning of work for their women clients. The similarities in the employed and unemployed women's perceptions of the significance of work are important because they suggest changing attitudes that may lead to increased role conflict for Puerto Rican women. Because work and family were both highly valued, the married women whose husbands or other family members did not support their work outside the home may experience a great dilemma about their choice of a life-style. Therefore, social workers should not take for granted that all Puerto Rican women have the traditional view that the family is paramount. They must also understand the stress and anxiety that a married woman may experience when she perceives that her husband has a negative attitude toward the employment of married women. On the other hand, if she works, her husband's negative attitude might make her feel guilty for all the problems the family confront, and hence may increase her anxiety. On the other hand, if she does not work because she perceives that her husband views her employment in a negative light, she may experience stress and anxiety because she is not satisfied with staying at home.

The socialization process that causes many Puerto Rican women to be unassertive is another area of concern. In many instances, the woman's real feelings should be explored profoundly and distinguished from what is socially expected. For example, the satisfaction that women expressed with housework and family life may have reflected their ideological formation rather than their real feelings. This contradiction also was observed in the employed women's expression of satisfaction with housework but their view of the dual tasks of paid work and housework as a problem.

The Council on Social Work Education requires that schools of social work incorporate content about minorities and women in their curricula to receive accreditation. Graduate and under graduate social work programs in Puerto Rico are beginning to include courses on women and sections about women in their regular courses. The study's findings, which contribute to the growing body of knowledge about women in Puerto Rico, can be discussed in these courses.

The study findings also underscore the importance of including content on employee assistance or industrial social welfare programs. Akabas (1982) stated that recognizing the importance of work and family systems in the lives of most people, industrial social welfare looks at potential populations at risk at the workplace and seeks to strengthen the services and enhance the opportunities that will prevent such workers from falling out of the world of work. Since Puerto Rican women highly value their families, services that make it possible for them to combine work and family should be analyzed carefully.

The finding that work has an important value for women should be taken into consideration by policymakers in the development of different programs such as social services, mental health services, and job training. For example, legislation should be directed toward creating the conditions necessary to incorporate women who want to work into the labor force. Measures to increase this should be implemented such as the development of job training programs, creation of part-time jobs, subsidized family care of children and institutional day care centers in the workplace.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of the study lead to several recommendations for future research. Because the study emphasized the description of attitudes rather than actual behavior, the way women construct their social reality deserves more research. The construction of reality and expected behavior are learned in the process of socialization. But the relationship between the social construction of reality and the behavior of women is not clear and needs to be documented. For example, traditional or less-traditional perceptions of family roles do not necessarily lead to traditional or less-traditional behavior. Ethnographic studies and in-depth interviews at different periods may produce information that corresponds more closely to women's actual attitudes and behaviors; such approaches should lead to further understanding of the ways in which Puerto Rican women reconcile what would appear to be significant role conflicts.

The statistical analysis highlighted the importance of the wives' perceptions of their husbands' attitudes toward their working as an intervening variable in married women's employment but provided no data about whether such perceptions reflected reality. Therefore, it would be very interesting to contrast the wife's perceptions with their husbands' actual attitudes. Furthermore, if there were differences between the attitudes of the husbands in the two groups, then it would be important to study the factors that contribute to these differences and how the husbands' attitudes might change over time.

The analysis of data suggested other areas of concern for future research. First, if most married women value work, then it is important to know how unemployed married women are able to cope with the fact that their decision to stay home was influenced by their perception that their husbands do not want them to be employed. Do unemployed women suffer more stress and anxiety than do employed women? Second, because it is highly likely that more and more women, particularly women with children, will be entering the labor force, research is needed on the adjustments their families will undergo and the needs that will be created by their employment. The needs of unemployed women also should be studied, especially of those whose educational backgrounds do not permit their working even though they may desire to do so.

Social workers can no longer assume that family and activities related to the home are the only concerns of women in Puerto Rico. They must explore the importance that Puerto Rican women attach to other types of activities, such as work; and the dilemma of family and work. Social workers also must understand the transition of many Puerto Rican women from traditional family roles to less-traditional family roles and the problems these women face in acquiring these new roles.

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